

Fortnightly Sermon

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SOLOMON AND THE LILIES

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SOLOMON AND THE LILIES.

"Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin; and yet I say unto you, that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these."—MAT. VI, 28-29.

I suppose this text was original with Jesus. Very many of the sayings of Jesus, as often I have told you, were current maxims among the Jews; often they were lessons of the scribes heard in the schools where the ancient Scripture was expounded and morality based on the law and the prophets. Sometimes, no doubt, they were flying maxims, ranging from mind to mind as birds fly among trees. These Jesus seized, because he knew a good, worthy and useful thing at once, and took it. 'Tis a finer sign of greatness to know the beauties that surround us than to invent or discover new ones; for to produce good things may have a smack of ambition or pride in it, but to know and take good things with homage is pure generosity and admiration. As a man either must not breathe or else breathe the air which is about him, so must a soul have no life or else drink of the life which is in the time and people. Whence Jesus, being a great life in himself, like a great pair of lungs breathed deeply of the life about him. Therefore, I say, the sayings of Jesus are full of echoes of the old Scriptures, of the sayings of the Rabbins, and of the wisdom of the people. Nevertheless he is very original, and this originality is in the form in which he says things, and in the manner,—a living manner. For a great soul takes some common truth, central, like the earth's axis, and cries it aloud once more with so living a voice that people start and tremble to see how great the thing is which perchance they have been repeating since their childhood. Jesus was very original in his figures and illustrations. He had the heart and

the eye of a great poet, which is to say, a great lover of things as they are. For only one who loves what is, will have clear sight of what ought to be. Jesus had an eye wide open. He saw the birds, the flowers, the grain, the tares, the trees, the seeds, and all manner of people as they worked, joyed, wept, prayed; and of these things he made wonderful stories, the like of which never were known before, nor have been since; for there are no illustrations in all the world together like Jesus' parables for beauty, grace and force. A society of learned Jews in Paris, authors of a book called "The Sources of the Sermon on the Mount," in which they give many passages from the Old Law and the prophets, and from Talmudical writings, parallel to Jesus' maxims in the Mountain Sermon, find no parallel to these phrases about Solomon and the lilies, and they dismiss them with this remark, "These verses comprise no moral precept; consequently there is no source to trace them from." So here, I think we have an instance probably of just Jesus' own way of looking about him and of saying things. Suppose we unfold his saying a little. As he compares things, so let us follow him. We will first look at Solomon and then at the lilies.

The magnificence of Solomon had become proverbial among the Jews, a point of national pride indeed. Nay, beyond the nation and country the fame of his glory had gone, as is shown by the story of the Queen of Sheba, who from Arabia Felix came to see Solomon, drawn by stories of his magnificence; also of his wisdom, for this was great fame indeed. So the Queen put hard questions to him, which he answered easily, and astonished her. But indeed with the splendor of the household she was quite overcome; for the account in the book of Kings says that when she saw his house and the meat of his table and his servants, and his cup-bearers, and the apparel of them all, "there was no more spirit in her." And she said to the King, "It was a true report that I heard in mine own land of thy acts and of thy wisdom. Howbeit, I believed not the words, until I came, and mine own eyes had seen it; and, behold, the half was not told me; thy wisdom and prosperity exceedeth the fame which I heard." It is written that she gave proof of her admiration by presenting the King with a great store of spices, and precious stones, and with one hundred and twenty talents of gold, or near

seventy-five thousand dollars. But to Solomon this was a trifle, and very like he was not to be out-done, but presented her an equivalent in some shape, since it is recorded that "Solomon gave her of his royal bounty." As to Solomon's money, we read that the amount that came to him in a year, in gold, was six hundred and sixty-six talents, or near four hundred thousand dollars; and this was not the whole, for it was over and above that which came from traders and merchants and by other ways, says the book of Kings. Having this princely income a year, this superb King knew how to apply it grandly. As to his own house there are incredible stories, the soberest of which is that he had one hundred and four wives. With these and all the attendants and servants innumerable, it is no wonder that eighty measures of fine flour and sixty measures of meal, and eighty whole oxen and one hundred sheep, and much game and fatted fowls, were the daily supply of his table. He lived in a house which had been thirteen years in building, adorned with cedar and other beautiful woods, and with hewn stones. Silver was not to be thought of for his household utensils and his table service; they were of pure gold. He had a throne of rich ivory inlaid with gold, and carved lions were around it. And in his house there hung five hundred massive targets or shields, two hundred large and three hundred smaller, plated with beaten gold. These precious targets were for the soldiers who made the body-guard of the monarch. He had an army comprising 40,000 stalls of horses, so the Scriptures read, and 12,000 horsemen and 1,400 chariots; also dromedaries. Vast abundance of food was collected for the horses and other animals. Also he had a great commercial navy, from which riches of all kinds flowed to his realm and to his own treasury. When he wished to build the temple, this rich king levied an army of 30,000 workmen whom he employed seven years in building the great structure. All manner of precious and costly materials were gathered, elaborate carvings of cedar wood, and profuse gold for the utensils of the temple and for the hinges of the doors; and he overlaid the house with pure gold and threw chains of gold across it. He had two immense cherubim made, carved of olive wood. He set in the temple two vast pillars of brass, 85 feet high and 24 feet around, and on the top of them he set

chapters of molten brass. The olive wood cherubim were 20 feet high, and 20 feet also from tip to tip of the out-stretched wings; and when set up in the temple, side by side, the tips of their wings touched each other, and the tips of the other wings touched the walls on both sides. Even the very floor of the house was covered with gold, and the walls with carvings of cherubim, of trees, and of flowers. Also he made many baths of brass for the temple, and besides these, a vast sea or brazen basin, called in the Scriptures a "molten sea," 20 feet in diameter and 60 feet around and 10 feet deep. And this vast brass basin stood on twelve brazen oxen, three facing each point of the compass. The basin was a hand-breadth thick, and the brim was finely wrought like the cup of a lily.

This was the wealth and splendor of the king, according to Jewish tradition. With this glory and pomp Jesus compared the lilies. Suppose we stand with the gentle Nazarene a little, and look on the flowers of the field; nay, let us do as he asked, consider of them. He used a strong word, translated consider. The Greek word means to learn or observe thoroughly, so as to understand. It is as if Jesus said, "We have walked back and forth here every day and seen these lilies, but yet, having eyes we have seen not. Let us stop now and really see,—consider of them, look at them, understand them." Palestine was then a blooming and beautiful country; nay, even long afterward, yea, and still now we learn from travelers of the lovely flowers of the fields in their season, shining white blooms, many to a stem, or other kinds that may be called lilies, of rich and varied colors. Jesus looked at these. Perhaps they lay like a great tapestry woven with silk floss in rich dyes; or mayhap, there was only one lovely spike that had strayed thither, blooming by the wayside. What matters it whether a profusion or one? The Master's eye would see the glory of them the same. So he stopped and looked awhile, his heart rising, we may guess, whither the lilies pointed. And then he said quietly, "What beauty, what charm, what perfection! But whence is it? Ah, that question maketh every flower a psalm; for we see no toiling nor spinning here, and yet, look you now whether Solomon in all his glory was arrayed like one of these."

Dear youth, rabbi, gentle Nazarene, holy wanderer, we will

follow thy thought. We will search what the lily hath to set beside Solomon's splendor. We will count its glories as we have told a few of Solomon's. First, there is the beauty of form, its lovely bell, its delicate petals, its vase nodding on the stem. But is this beauty greater than the costly woods and the gold, the carvings, the robes and the circling trains in which the King was arrayed? Secondly, the lily has delicacy of color, richness and beauty too; but were these greater than the silken hues, the rich carvings of woods, the gorgeous tapestry, and the ivory tints of Solomon's palace? Thirdly, the lily sways on its stem as gracefully as if a beam of light had been caught and molded into a flowery bell,—the waves of the light changed into an inexpressible still subtleness, the leap of the light, sixty thousand leagues in a second, transmuted to a perfection of confined motion, a lovely, swaying slenderness; and not only its movement in the breeze is perfection, but each stop or attitude is a seizure of delicate curves. Well, were these unequaled by the grace, the charm and subtle lines of the carvings of palms and flowers on the temple walls by the King's workmen, the 30,000 who seven years labored in the structure? I know not. It is sure that what men can do is as natural as what the earth pours forth untilled. If men can see beauty, their hands are glorious tools wherewith to mould it. I cannot say that because God makes the lily, therefore it is more beautiful than all Solomon's splendor; for God made man, and perchance it is greater to make a maker of beauty than to make a beautiful thing, and the maker who is made may effect a beauty glorious and worthy of his heavenly spring of life. Yet I think it is true, as Jesus said when he looked at the lilies, that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Why is this true? Let us follow a little to see.

First, the lily is very simple. Jesus, it seems to me, was thinking of the pure beauty of a few simple charms compared with rich array. Here in the lily is but a comeliness of form, a slender witchery of grace, having but one color, or with mayhap a little shading or a fleck or two of contrasting hues; and that is all. Its exquisite perfection is wrought of very little. It has a beauty like a few lines in a face, which mean a depth of soul. Nothing is heaped up in the flower; it is chaste, pure, with the

kind of charm which a clear ringing note has, from a silver bell or tuneful string, or a pure pipe. It is like a melody wherein notes following each other become one,—a pure thought or feeling. Oh! I care not what manner of richness there be in profusion, how splendid the array, how rolling on one another like waves be the adornments, no, nor how well fitted, either, without jarring! Still always there will be a beauty in simplicity which the gorgeous collection hath not. It is superior beauty, beauty I might say in itself, the essence, the living soul of it, which, says Milton, “unadorned is adorned the most,” because it is so perfect that, as it can spare nothing, so naught can be added. I would that more we understood this beauty of simplicity which is the beauty of the earth and sky, of crystals and flowers, of water, stars, tones, eyes, smiles, faces, hands, shapes, motions. If such beauties were gathered in houses, in costumes, and in manners, we should have the beauty wherewith the lily surpassed Solomon’s array, as Jesus said. For a profusion of beauties is not beauty, perchance; and even if they be well matched and in proportion, still if they be over-much, they have not the lily’s beauty, which is pure perfection.

Secondly, the beauty of the lily is seen to be in keeping with all the conditions around it. It wrongs nothing; it comes of no unwholesome root; it has no bad contrasts; it offends no one with pity for what it has drawn on. For the earth is made for its root, and the soil has its own beauty of freshness, aroma, color, substance. But not so Solomon’s array; for his apparel cost many a poor man’s garment, and the dye of his robes was slaves’ blood, and all his array was sucked rankly, as weeds grow, from heaps of oppression and taxation. Make me aught as fair as you will, heap color on color with harmony, or shape on shape with grace, or gather and array soft fabrics and golden hangings in which rainbows and sunbeams seem woven,—and what then? If they be luxuries, they are not fair. Though crimson be beautiful, it is not so when it is a blood stain; no, but mournful and horrible. If Bacon be wise when he says “a crowd is not company, and faces are but a gallery of pictures, and talk but a tinkling cymbal, where there is no love,” I say it is wisdom too that beauties make not beauty, nor fair things comeliness, nor pomps magnificence, when these are feasts built

on fasts, surfeits hung on gripes of hunger, pleasures bred of pains and laughs of plaints, and all a flaunting array wrung from the labor of other bodies that never taste in their mouths, or in their heart or soul, the delicacies and the charms. Therefore the lily has a pure loveliness which is heavenly and comes of purity, and is not less glorious and divine that it is so simple. But the array of Solomon is like the surface of floating tarry or other unclean refuse, counterfeiting the iris of pearls, the fire-pied opal, the prismatic sun ray, but black underneath and shameful.

Again, the lily's charms, which before I have mentioned, I mean its simple beauties of form, slender grace, and plain softness of color—these are a part of the very life of the lily; not something put on as colors, carvings, plaitings and over-laying of gold in a house. Not so; the lily's beauties are a part of the lily's self. For the lily is clothed with these beauties and yet naked. Who can cut into them, or under them, and find somewhat underneath on which they lie? Nay, but they are through and through the lily, the lovely shape being in every atom of the substance, and the graceful delicacy in every part, and the colors sinking through the soft cells; whereby the lily is not something adorned, but itself is adornment; and not something with shape laid on it, but itself is grace and form. If we look at Solomon for the like of this, it is not his apparel or his great array whatsoever that we can compare, but only Solomon's body; and if I mistake not, the selfish and degenerate life in this so great luxury, pride, glitter, flourish and surfeit, could build no fine body, neither in shape nor in the bright and clear blushes of virtuous health; nor do aught but enervate, degrade, misshape and blot the human form divine. Jesus indeed did well to say that not Solomon in all his glory was arrayed like the lilies, since the lily's raiment was but the lily in all its light, freedom, beauty and very life. But Solomon's raiment was put on, hiding a body wherein vile wantoning had dug bad seams running with the tears of the poor. Ay, he spoke well, that nature-loving Nazarene, the lover of flowers and birds and trees and grain, sheep, mustard-seeds and men, he spoke well; for there is no divine beauty that can be taken off and hung on a peg; and if the vesture of Solomon were in a thousand parts and every part a vesture, gleaming with gems and gold and Tyrian dyes,

they could not array the body as the shape and color of health do, nor make the face noble, which is the beauty of the face, nor be true magnificence, nor aught but dross and waste before the beauty of the lily, which is only itself.

Again, there is this very lovely charm about the lily's beauty that there is no rivalry in it. It is not pitted against any other lily or flower; it seeks excellence, but not to get the better of another or to set itself off by contrast. Nay, in no way it thinks of any other, but simply of being beautiful; and this is a kind of worshipfulness, an uplooking toward infinite beauty, a holy purpose of life, or perhaps better I may say, a holy purpose to live, without thought to live better than another, but only to live according to life, which is beauty and glory and strength. But what were Solomon's pomps, parades, gauds, and fringes but comparison of himself with his nobles or with other princes, that not merely he might shine, but outshine others? Oh this is a mean and foolish temper, besmirched with envy if there be any richer than ourselves, and beclouded more still with all the envies which thus are caused in others whose humor or simplicity is turned awry and their bosoms filled with heart-burning. In my soul I abhor the temper which has no peace in excellence, but only in surpassing others, and no joy in beauty unless it be greater than some others have, and no thanks for fortune unless it grow against the shadow of some other's failure. It is unlovely to be happy that we leave others behind or that they cannot keep pace with us. This is not beauty, nor splendor, nor fair raiment; and when any glory has this temper with it, a king with all the glory is not arrayed like one of these lilies.

Finally, if the lily be charming in its beauty because in no way it thinks of itself, not wishing to compare itself with another, or to win in a race, this is the same as to say that it thinks not of others to be admired by them. Nay, it would bloom the same in a wilderness; and this fact an old Hebrew poet saw to be divine beauty and blessedness in the herb of the field, which he says springs the same in the desert, in the wilderness where there is no man. An English poet has sung of the flowers that "blush unseen," that they "waste their sweetness on the desert air." But therein he has had not the Master's heart, the soul of Him of Galilee, the spirit of the Nazarene, who,

standing by the wayside and comparing the lilies with Solomon, bethought him, I must believe, that the sweetness and beauty of the lily were its reasons for being, and that beauty was never a waste, but great riches, although but in a flower's bosom, unwitnessed, unvisited. The Nazarene, I say, saw that this sincerity arrayed the blossom in more divinity than "doth hedge a king." Comparing the flowers with Solomon, who in purple and fine linen sat for admiration on his ivory throne, and would have bemoaned himself or have squatted perhaps on the turf if no throngs had been by to applaud his high seat, Jesus said that the King in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. A poet has thought like this about his verse, counting it praise and greatness if the verse be true and sincere. He says,—

"Ah, 'tis an easy thing
To write and sing,
But to write true, unfeigned verse, is very hard."

The poet means that verse must not be robed, as it were for multitudes to shout around, nor adorned that any may praise, but only true and unfeigned and for itself. And truly, whatever is painted or put on for another's eye, and elsewhere left in darkness, hath no lily's beauty.

Look now at the gorgeous King and the simple lily, and consider them as the Master's saying has set them before us. What garments have we seen the lily clothed withal? What but simple beauty of form and chaste brightness of color and a swaying slenderness of grace, and these all through it and in it, the color and the shape not being spread on it, but living throughout it; and to all these we have to add the thoughts that breathe in it, which I have set forth,—that it is simplicity; and that its sweet beauty is in keeping with all its environs and united with them in peace; and that naught is put on by it any more than made by toiling and spinning, but only grown; and that in its honied heart there is no rivalry, nor doth it bloom to surpass others; and that it seeks not applause nor fame, but only to be what it is, nor would be a waste even in a wilderness. And what withal was Solomon arrayed? With what but heaps of things that were not of him but were put on him, and he no better for them, and other men worse and stricken with woes. Truly Jesus was right and the lily was the beautiful being, and

Solomon in all his glory not arrayed like one of these. O! to value the right thing! O! to prize the precious! O! to love the lovable! O! to adore the adorable! This is the secret of life. How many go straying far away, prizing what has a taint, valuing the worthless, loving what truly is hateful and makes us so, adoring what is but an idol made with hands. But the secret of life, the secret which lifts life high, is to take what truly is set forth by God to be taken and not to be left or put away; and to love what he hath made akin in value to the human heart, and to worship what comes of his divinity and is everlasting, which is simplicity and pure beauty, and kind affection, and the love of goodness for itself, and a comradeship with all without wishing to make any seem less or be less. These are the first things. Whoso knows them, that they are first, and follows after them, stands close by the Son of Man from Nazareth while he looks on the lilies and says that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.